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opening extract from

Anne of Avonlea

(with an introduction by Budge Wilson)

written by

L.M. Montgomery

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An Irate Neighbour

A tall, slim girl, 'half past sixteen', with serious grey eyes and hair which her friends called auburn, had sat down on the broad red sandstone doorstep of a Prince Edward Island farmhouse one ripe afternoon in August, firmly resolved to construe so many lines of Virgil.

But an August afternoon, with blue hazes scarfing the harvest slopes, little winds whispering elfishly in the poplars, and a dancing splendour of red poppies outflaming against the dark coppice of young firs in a corner of the cherry orchard was fitter for dreams than dead languages. The Virgil soon slipped unheeded to the ground, and Anne, her chin propped on her clasped hands, and her eyes on the splendid mass of fluffy clouds that were heaping up just over Mr J. A. Harrison's house like a great white mountain, was far away in a delicious world where a certain school-teacher was doing a wonderful work, shaping the destinies of future statesmen, and inspiring youthful minds and hearts with high and lofty ambitions.

To be sure, if you came down to harsh facts ... which, it must be confessed, Anne seldom did until she had to ... it did not seem likely that there was much promising material for celebrities in Avonlea school; but you could never tell what might happen if a teacher used her influence for good. Anne had certain rose-tinted ideals of what a teacher might accomplish if she only went the right way about it; and she was in the midst of a delightful scene, forty years hence, with a famous personage ... just exactly what he was to be famous for was left in convenient haziness, but Anne thought it would be rather nice to have him a college president or a Canadian premier ... bowing low over her wrinkled hand and assuring her that it was she who had first kindled his ambition, and that all his success in life was due to the lessons she had instilled so long ago in Avonlea school. The pleasant vision was shattered by a most unpleasant interruption.

A demure little Jersey cow came scuttling down the lane, and, five seconds later Mr Harrison arrived ... if 'arrived' be not too mild a term to describe the manner of his irruption into the yard.

He bounced over the fence without waiting to open the gate, and angrily confronted astonished Anne, who had risen to her feet and stood looking at him in some bewilderment. Mr Harrison was their new right-hand neighbour, and she had never met him before, although she had seen him once or twice.

In early April, before Anne had come home from Queen's, Mr Robert Bell, whose farm adjoined the Cuthbert place on the west, had sold out and moved to Charlottetown. His farm had been bought by a certain Mr J. A. Harrison; whose name, and the fact that he was a New Brunswick man, were all that was known about him. But before he had been a month in Avonlea he had won the reputation of being an odd person . . . a 'crank' Mrs Rachel Lynde said. Mrs Rachel was an outspoken lady, as those of you who may have already made her acquaintance will remember. Mr Harrison was certainly different from other people . . . and that is the essential characteristic of a crank, as everybody knows.

In the first place he kept house for himself, and had publicly stated that he wanted no fools of women around his diggings. Feminine Avonlea took its revenge by the gruesome tales it related about his housekeeping and cooking. He had hired little John Henry Carter of White Sands, and John Henry started the stories. For one thing, there was never any stated time for meals in the Harrison establishment. Mr Harrison 'got a bite' when he felt hungry, and if John Henry were around at the time, he came in for a share, but if he were not, he had to wait until Mr Harrison's next hungry spell. John Henry mournfully averred that he would have starved to death if it wasn't that he got home on Sundays and got a good filling up, and that his mother always gave

him a basket of 'grub' to take back with him on Monday mornings.

As for washing dishes, Mr Harrison never made any pretence of doing it unless a rainy Sunday came. Then he went to work and washed them all at once in the rainwater hogshead, and left them to drain dry.

Again, Mr Harrison was 'close'. When he was asked to subscribe to the Rev. Mr Allan's salary he said he'd wait and see how many dollars' worth of good he got out of his preaching first . . . *he* didn't believe in buying a pig in a poke. And when Mrs Lynde went to ask for a contribution to missions . . . and incidentally to see the inside of the house . . . he told her there were more heathens among the old woman gossips in Avonlea than anywhere else he knew of, and he'd cheerfully contribute to a mission for Christianizing them if she'd undertake it. Mrs Rachel got herself away and said it was a mercy poor Mrs Robert Bell was safe in her grave, for it would have broken her heart to see the state of her house, in which she used to take so much pride.

'Why, she scrubbed the kitchen floor every second day,' Mrs Lynde told Marilla Cuthbert indignantly, 'and if you could see it now! I had to hold up my skirts as I walked across it.'

Finally, Mr Harrison kept a parrot called Ginger. Nobody in Avonlea had ever kept a parrot before; consequently that proceeding was considered barely respectable.

And such a parrot! If you took John Henry Carter's word for it, never was such an unholy bird. It swore terribly. Mrs Carter would have taken John Henry away at once if she had been sure she could get another place for him. Besides, Ginger had bitten a piece right out of the back of John Henry's neck one day when he had stooped down too near the cage. Mrs Carter showed everybody the mark when the luckless John Henry went home on Sundays.

All these things flashed through Anne's mind as Mr Harrison stood, quite speechless with wrath apparently, before her. In his most amiable mood Mr Harrison could not have been considered a handsome man; he was short and fat and bald; and now, with his round face purple with rage and his prominent blue eyes almost sticking out of his head, Anne thought he was really the ugliest person she had ever seen.

All at once Mr Harrison found his voice.

'I'm not going to put up with this,' he spluttered, 'not a day longer, do you hear, miss. Bless my soul, this is the third time, miss . . . the third time! Patience has ceased to be a virtue, miss. I warned your aunt the last time not to let it occur again . . . and she's let it . . . she's done it . . . what does she mean by it, that is what I want to know. That is what I'm here about, miss.'

'Will you explain what the trouble is?' asked Anne, in her most dignified manner. She had been practising it considerably of late to have it in good working order when

school began; but it had no apparent effect on the irate J. A. Harrison.

'Trouble, is it? Bless my soul, trouble enough, I should think. The trouble is, miss, that I found that Jersey cow of your aunt's in my oats again, not half an hour ago. The third time, mark you. I found her in last Tuesday and I found her in yesterday. I came here and told your aunt not to let it occur again. She *has* let it occur again. Where's your aunt, miss? I just want to see her for a minute and give her a piece of my mind . . . a piece of J. A. Harrison's mind, miss.'

'If you mean Miss Marilla Cuthbert, she is *not* my aunt, and she has gone down to East Grafton to see a distant relative of hers who is very ill,' said Anne, with due increase of dignity at every word. 'I am very sorry that my cow should have broken into your oats . . . she *is* my cow and not Miss Cuthbert's . . . Matthew gave her to me three years ago when she was a little calf and he bought her from Mr Bell.'

'Sorry, miss! Sorry isn't going to help matters any. You'd better go and look at the havoc that animal has made in my oats . . . trampled them from centre to circumference, miss.'

'I am very sorry,' repeated Anne firmly, 'but perhaps if you kept your fences in better repair Dolly might not have broken in. It is your part of the line fence that separates your oat-field from our pasture, and I noticed the other day that it was not in a very good condition.'

'My fence is all right,' snapped Mr Harrison, angrier than ever at this carrying of the war into the enemy's country. 'The gaol fence couldn't keep a demon of a cow like that out. And I can tell you, you red-headed snippet, that if the cow is yours, as you say, you'd be better employed in watching her out of other people's grain than in sitting round reading yellow-covered novels' . . . with a scathing glance at the innocent tan-coloured Virgil by Anne's feet.

Something at that moment was red besides Anne's hair . . . which had always been a tender point with her.

'I'd rather have red hair than none at all except a little fringe round my ears,' she flashed.

The shot told, for Mr Harrison was really very sensitive about his bald head. His anger choked him up again, and he could only glare speechlessly at Anne, who recovered her temper and followed up her advantage.

'I can make allowance for you, Mr Harrison, because I have an imagination. I can easily imagine how very trying it must be to find a cow in your oats, and I shall not cherish any hard feelings against you for the things you've said. I promise you that Dolly shall never break into your oats again. I give you my word of honour on *that* point.'

'Well, mind you she doesn't,' muttered Mr Harrison in a somewhat subdued tone; but he stamped off angrily enough, and Anne heard him growling to himself until he was out of earshot.

Grievously disturbed in mind, Anne marched across the yard, and shut the naughty Jersey up in the milking-pen.

'She can't possibly get out of that unless she tears the fence down,' she reflected. 'She looks pretty quiet now. I dare say she has sickened herself on those oats. I wish I'd sold her to Mr Shearer when he wanted her last week, but I thought it was just as well to wait until we had the auction of the stock and let them all go together. I believe it is true about Mr Harrison being a crank. Certainly there's nothing of the kindred spirit about *him*.'

Anne had always a weather eye open for kindred spirits.

Marilla Cuthbert was driving into the yard as Anne returned to the house, and the latter flew to get tea ready. They discussed the matter at the tea-table.

'I'll be glad when the auction is over,' said Marilla. 'It is too much responsibility having so much stock about the place and nobody but that unreliable Martin to look after them. He has never come back yet, and he promised that he would certainly be back last night if I'd give him the day off to go to his aunt's funeral. I don't know how many aunts he has got, I am sure. That's the fourth that's died since he hired here a year ago. I'll be more than thankful when the crop is in and Mr Barry takes over the farm. We'll have to keep Dolly shut up in the pen till Martin comes, for she must be put in the back pasture,

and the fences there have to be fixed. I declare it is a world of trouble, as Rachel says. Here's poor Mary Keith dying, and what is to become of those two children of hers is more than I know. She has a brother in British Columbia and she has written to him about them, but she hasn't heard from him yet.'

'What are the children like? How old are they?'

'Six past . . . they're twins.'

'Oh, I've always been especially interested in twins ever since Mrs Hammond had so many,' said Anne eagerly. 'Are they pretty?'

'Goodness, you couldn't tell . . . they were too dirty. Davy had been out making mud pies and Dora went out to call him in. Davy pushed her head first into the biggest pie and then, because she cried, he got into it himself and wallowed in it to show her it was nothing to cry about. Mary said Dora was really a very good child, but that Davy was full of mischief. He has never had any bringing up, you might say. His father died when he was a baby and Mary has been sick almost ever since.'

'I'm always sorry for children that have had no bringing up,' said Anne soberly. 'You know *I* hadn't any till you took me in hand. I hope their uncle will look after them. Just what relation is Mrs Keith to you?'

'Mary? None in the world. It was her husband . . . he was our third cousin. There's Mrs Lynde coming through the yard. I thought she'd be up to hear about Mary.'

'Don't tell her about Mr Harrison and the cow,' implored Anne.

Marilla promised; but the promise was quite unnecessary, for Mrs Lynde was no sooner fairly seated than she said:

'I saw Mr Harrison chasing your Jersey out of his oats today when I was coming home from Carmody. I thought he looked pretty mad. Did he make much of a rumpus?'

Anne and Marilla furtively exchanged amused smiles. Few things in Avonlea ever escaped Mrs Lynde. It was only that morning Anne had said: 'If you went to your own room at midnight, locked the door, pulled down the blind, and *sneezed*, Mrs Lynde would ask you the next day how your cold was!'

'I believe he did,' admitted Marilla. 'I was away. He gave Anne a piece of his mind.'

'I think he is a very disagreeable man,' said Anne, with a resentful toss of her ruddy head.

'You never said a truer word,' said Mrs Rachel solemnly. 'I knew there'd be trouble when Robert Bell sold his place to a New Brunswick man, that's what. I don't know what Avonlea is coming to, with so many strange people rushing into it. It'll soon not be safe to go to sleep in our beds.'

'Why, what other strangers are coming in?' asked Marilla.

'Haven't you heard? Well, there's a family of Donnells,

for one thing. They've rented Peter Sloane's old house. Peter has hired the man to run his mill. They belong down east and nobody knows anything about them. Then that shiftless Timothy Cotton family are going to move up from White Sands, and they'll simply be a burden on the public. He is in consumption ... when he isn't stealing ... and his wife is a slack-twisted creature that can't turn her hand to a thing. She washes her dishes *sitting down.* Mrs George Pye has taken her husband's orphan nephew, Anthony Pye. He'll be going to school to you, Anne, so you may expect trouble, that's what. And you'll have another strange pupil too. Paul Irving is coming from the States to live with his grandmother. You remember his father, Marilla ... Stephen Irving, him that jilted Lavendar Lewis over at Grafton?'

'I don't think he jilted her. There was a quarrel ... I suppose there was blame on both sides.'

'Well, anyway, he didn't marry her, and she's been as queer as possible ever since, they say ... living all by herself in that little stone house she calls Echo Lodge. Stephen went off to the States and went into business with his uncle and married a Yankee. He's never been home since, though his mother has been up to see him once or twice. His wife died two years ago and he's sending the boy home to his mother for a spell. He's ten years old, and I don't know if he'll be a very desirable pupil. You can never tell about those Yankees.'

Mrs Lynde looked upon all people who had the misfortune to be born or brought up elsewhere than in Prince Edward Island with a decided can-any-good-thing-come-out-of-Nazareth air. They *might* be good people, of course; but you were on the safe side in doubting it. She had a special prejudice against 'Yankees'. Her husband had been cheated out of ten dollars by an employer for whom he had once worked in Boston, and neither angels nor principalities nor powers could have convinced Mrs Rachel that the whole United States was not responsible for it.

'Avonlea school won't be the worse for a little new blood,' said Marilla dryly, 'and if this boy is anything like his father he'll be all right. Steve Irving was the nicest boy that was ever raised in these parts, though some people did call him proud. I should think Mrs Irving would be very glad to have the child. She has been very lonesome since her husband died.'

'Oh, the boy may be well enough, but he'll be different from Avonlea children,' said Mrs Rachel, as if that clinched the matter. Mrs Rachel's opinions concerning any person, place, or thing were always warranted to wear. 'What's this I hear about your going to start up a Village Improvement Society, Anne?'

'I was just talking it over with some of the girls and boys at the last Debating Club,' said Anne, flushing. 'They thought it would be rather nice ... and so do Mr and Mrs Allan. Lots of villages have them now.'

'Well, you'll get into no end of hot water if you do. Better leave it alone, Anne, that's what. People don't like being improved.'

'Oh, we are not going to try to improve the *people*. It is Avonlea itself. There are lots of things which might be done to make it prettier. For instance, if we could coax Mr Levi Boulter to pull down that dreadful old house on his upper farm, wouldn't that be an improvement?'

'It certainly would,' admitted Mrs Rachel. 'That old ruin has been an eyesore to the settlement for years. But if you Improvers can coax Levi Boulter to do anything for the public that he isn't to be paid for doing, may I be there to see and hear the process, that's what. I don't want to discourage you, Anne, for there may be something in your idea, though I suppose you did get it out of some rubbishy Yankee magazine; but you'll have your hands full with your school, and I advise you as a friend not to bother with your improvements, that's what. But there, I know you'll go ahead with it if you've set your mind on it. You were always one to carry a thing through somehow.'

Something about the firm outlines of Anne's lips told that Mrs Rachel was not far astray in this estimate. Anne's heart was bent on forming the Improvement Society. Gilbert Blythe, who was to teach in White Sands, but would always be home from Friday night to Monday morning, was enthusiastic about it; and most of the other young folks were willing to go in for anything that meant

occasional meetings, and consequently some 'fun'. As for what the 'improvements' were to be, nobody had any very clear idea except Anne and Gilbert. They had talked them over and planned them out until an ideal Avonlea existed in their minds, if nowhere else.

Mrs Rachel had still another item of news.

'They've given the Carmody school to a Priscilla Grant. Didn't you go to Queen's with a girl of that name, Anne?'

'Yes, indeed. Priscilla to teach at Carmody! How perfectly lovely!' exclaimed Anne, her grey eyes lighting up until they looked like evening stars, causing Mrs Lynde to wonder anew if she would ever get it settled to her satisfaction whether Anne Shirley were really a pretty girl or not.